



# Enriching the lives of Autistic seniors

As we grow older, staying active and engaged in the world can become more challenging. In addition to the natural ageing process, Autistic people may face additional physical and mental health issues as well as daily living concerns.

**Our purpose  
a different brilliant®**

Understanding, engaging  
and celebrating the strengths,  
interests and aspirations of people  
on the autism spectrum.

Despite these challenges, many senior Autistic adults report a good quality of life when they receive adequate support and accommodations and have access to supportive services, meaningful activities and opportunities for social engagement.

If you are a part of an Autistic senior's life, there are many ways to provide support and enrichment to improve their quality of life.

## Late diagnosis is common among older adults

Did you know that the word 'autism' wasn't included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, the main reference book for psychiatry, until 1980?

Even nowadays, it's not uncommon for adults to recognise their own autism only when their child is diagnosed.

## Have a meaningful conversation

You don't get to be a senior citizen without encountering some amazing life stories along the way. So, find a comfortable, sensory-friendly space and take time to actively listen to the Autistic seniors in your life. You might even gain some valuable insights from their lifetime of knowledge and experience!

Research conducted by the Aspect Research Centre for Autism Practice (ARCAP) shows Autistic individuals experience more intense and frequent loneliness compared to non-Autistic individuals<sup>1</sup>. Having meaningful conversations with older Autistic individuals can help them combat serious health concerns, such as social isolation and loneliness.

**Tip:** Looking for a conversation starter? Many (but not all) Autistic people have strong interests that they enjoy talking about.



## Get social

Research shows many Autistic people are interested in connecting with others, even though they may find social situations challenging or overwhelming<sup>2</sup>. You can support Autistic seniors to find like-minded people by exploring local groups designed for older adults on the autism spectrum. If local groups are few and far between, consider looking for online interest groups.

**Tip:** Online communities are great options for Autistic seniors who have mobility issues, are tech savvy or prefer virtual communication.



## Focus on brain health and mental wellbeing

While memory loss is a normal part of ageing, it can also be an early sign of dementia. Other symptoms of dementia include difficulties in word finding and thinking processes, changes in personality or behaviour, a lack of initiative and changes in day-to-day function. Since older Autistic adults may be more likely to experience age-related cognitive conditions compared to non-Autistic seniors, it is very important for Autistic people to keep their brains healthy. In addition to staying connected and active (see sections above), Autistic people can help to keep their minds sharp by playing games like puzzles, crosswords and card games, or learning a new language or hobby.

Autistic adults are more likely than non-Autistic people to experience nearly all mental health conditions including anxiety, depression, psychotic disorders, attention deficit disorders, personality disorders and suicidality<sup>3</sup>.

Anxiety and depression in older people may occur for different reasons, but physical illness or personal loss can be common triggers. For some Autistic people, being undiagnosed throughout most of their life and the consequences of receiving a late diagnosis can present mental health challenges. Another source of stress is "masking", when Autistic people mimic neurotypical people by hiding their autism traits.

**Tip:** Our busy, noisy world can place enormous strain on Autistic people's wellbeing and lead to extreme physical, mental or emotional exhaustion called Autistic burnout. To help someone recover from Autistic burnout, provide a supportive and understanding environment, allowing them the time and space they need to rest and recharge.



## Encourage a healthy lifestyle

As we age, regular exercise and healthy eating are among the most important things we can do for our health. This is particularly important for Autistic people who we know are more likely to have health conditions typically linked to ageing, like osteoporosis, cognitive disorders, heart disease, cancer, cerebrovascular disease and osteoarthritis<sup>2</sup>.

Encouraging Autistic seniors to get active may help prevent or delay physical and mental health problems and allow them to keep doing their day-to-day activities without becoming dependent on others. The best exercise for people is one they are going to do regularly, so look for physical activities that are fun, doable and align with their interests. If the individual is overweight, suffers from a chronic illness or has been sedentary for some time, it is recommended they see their doctor before starting any new exercise routine.

Autistic seniors who wish to participate in organised physical activities or sporting teams may face barriers, as found in this research study by ARCAP. Organisations can help make physical activities and sports more inclusive for older Autistic people by having their staff complete autism training, increasing the predictability of activities, offering one-on-one coaching and providing better support for sensory and access needs.

Healthy eating is an important part of healthy ageing. Having a healthy diet can help support muscles and strengthen bones, which can help with balance and independence. A nutritious diet lowers the risk of health problems such as heart disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes, stroke and some cancers, which are widespread among Autistic people<sup>3</sup>.

Changing long-held eating habits can be tough, particularly for some Autistic people who may eat only a limited range of food or may over-eat<sup>3</sup>. You can support Autistic seniors to incorporate a healthy diet into their routine by taking them on a trip to the supermarket and picking out healthy options, making a healthy meal together or encouraging them to talk with their doctor or pharmacist about their diet and any vitamin or mineral supplements they may need.

**Tip:** Autistic seniors may be more prone to health problems because they do not receive adequate support to manage their health care. If required, check-in with older Autistic people to ensure they have support from a trusted family member, friend or guardian.



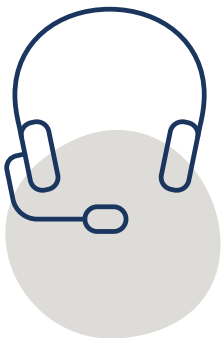
## Navigating day-to-day life

Each Autistic individual is unique, with varying abilities to manage daily tasks and self-care. Some people may navigate their senior years with minimal assistance, while others may require substantial support or caregiver assistance.

One research study suggests that the daily organisational and planning abilities of Autistic adults may not decrease much over time<sup>4</sup>. Another study found when it comes to planning and memory, Autistic seniors performed no differently to non-Autistic seniors; however, Autistic seniors reported feeling more challenged in these areas<sup>5</sup>. This suggests that older adults on the autism spectrum might lack confidence in handling self-care tasks like managing medications or monitoring health indicators.

Older Autistic people who do not have support from a trusted family member or friend might consider contacting an organisation like **Disability Gateway** for advice.

**Tip:** When possible, enable older Autistic people to make their own choices to preserve their sense of control, instil confidence, and boost their autonomy and quality of life.

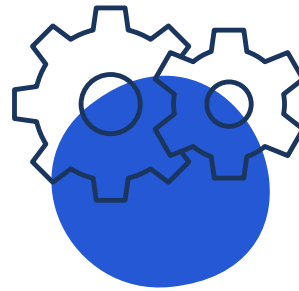


## Getting government support

Government support like the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and My Aged Care are available to help Autistic people with everyday living including personal care and support services, transport, housing, and household tasks and modifications. For advice on these schemes contact:

- **Autism Connect** 1300 308 699
- **Disability Gateway** 1800 643 787
- **Carer Gateway** 1800 422 737

**Tip:** There is a lot of demand for My Aged Care Home Care Packages and applicants may need to join a long waitlist. Don't delay applying for support!



## Adapting to change

Very little is known about the specific needs of older Autistic adults navigating major life changes such as retirement and moving to residential care.

One recent study on Autistic people's experiences of retiring found that challenges in retirement planning and adjustment were reported by some, whereas others viewed retirement as a positive respite from challenging work environments. Having more leisure time was appreciated by some, whereas others encountered ongoing responsibilities and obstacles hindering their participation in activities. A common theme was the inadequate support available for Autistic people during retirement.

Autistic seniors have expressed concerns about the aging process, including concerns about health decline and the possibility of entering residential care<sup>9</sup>.

One research study identified ten key areas where adjustments may be necessary to meet the needs of Autistic seniors in residential care: managing transitions into residential care, autism training for residential care staff, recognising and respecting Autistic differences and understanding Autistic well-being, supporting physical health, the sensory environment and sensory processing, design principles, creating community and belonging, autonomy and choice, advocacy and evaluating care quality<sup>6</sup>.

**Tip:** Always empower Autistic seniors to express their needs and preferences and ensure they have autonomy over the decision-making process.

## Aspect offers a comprehensive approach, based on the idea of a different brilliant<sup>®</sup>, that:

- Respects difference and diversity
- Builds a person's skills based on their strengths, interests, aspirations and support needs
- Develops autism-friendly environments
- Supports others to understand and embrace autism and to develop respectful supportive interactions.

We are committed to making life better for people on the autism spectrum.

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